CHAPTER 61: EMBRACE THE TERROR, REJECT ALL FATE

Once they were done with the soup, Qian Shanyi shooed Wang Yonghao back into the tavern room. There was a chance someone would return, ask more questions, and someone had to stay up in the room to answer them, at least until midnight. She told him to cook something to pass the time - they would eat it in the morning, and he'd be doing so a lot over the next week.

She stayed in the world fragment. With the duel coming up, she had to take every opportunity to soak up the rich spiritual energy of the world fragment, to heal her ribs and meridians so that she could go back to cultivating.

"Let's see about making you a hammock," she said to Linghui Mei. Most of her theories about the woman - the kitsune - were still based on guesses, so she hoped she could get her to talk more about herself. "If you are going to be staying with us for an entire month, you would need somewhere to sleep."

Kitsune's eyes narrowed in sharp suspicion. "You said a *week*," she said.

"A week on the outside," Qian Shanyi motioned upwards, towards the entrance portal. "A month here. Time flows faster with the entrance closed. Did Wang Yonghao not mention this?"

"He did. I do not believe either of you."

"Hmm. Reasonable, perhaps. We'll prove it to you once a moon comes out."

They still had some spare rosevine rope, as well as plenty of fibre. Her rope spinning wheel had thankfully survived their little tussle intact, and she got Linghui Mei to help her. The kitsune watched her with suspicion - though at this point, Qian Shanyi was starting to suspect it was simply her true nature, and seeming "normal" was a carefully constructed mask.

It was hard to fault her for it, really. Qian Shanyi might have felt the same, if she had spent her entire life in hiding and pursuit, fearing for her life.

"Before I forget again - what do you eat?" She asked, once the wheel was secured, spinning gently with a push of her foot. Ropemaking didn't take much thought. Linghui Mei sat next to her, offering her new fibres to thread into the rope. "You didn't partake of our soup before."

"What do you care?"

And here she thought the kitsune was past doubting her every word. "If you will be staying with us for a month," she explained patiently, not letting her annoyance show, "we would need to know what to feed you, so that you won't starve."

“Meat,” Linghui Mei responded after five entire seconds of silence.

Honestly, so much mystery over nothing. She’d ask the spirit hunter tomorrow about overall kitsune diet, if she could find him free in town somewhere. “Meat prepared how?”

“What do you mean, prepared?”

“Fried? Boiled? Steamed? Stewed?”

“Raw.”

Because she couldn’t digest cooked food, or because she preferred the taste? More questions... “Raw how?”

“What do you mean, raw how?” Linghui Mei scowled, her face twisting, fangs growing out for a brief moment. “Raw meat is raw meat. It’s not cooked.”

Qian Shanyi sighed. “Am I not an immortal chef?” she asked rhetorically. “If I say I can cook raw meat without cooking it, what godling dares to doubt my word? Raw meat can be hot or cold, it could be ground, sliced, cubed, tenderized or served as a whole cut, it could be salted, seasoned, marinaded or coated with sauce *while still remaining raw*. So tell me how you like your raw meat so I can make you the dish of your dreams.”

Linghui Mei’s scowl receded, and she looked at Qian Shanyi strangely. “Just…raw,” she said quietly.

"I suppose we'll just have to try every combination and see what you like best," Qian Shanyi said neutrally. A lot of work left to break through these thorns.

She tried to pull the kitsune into more conversation, though to no real success. At least the reflexive flares of anger seemed to be getting rarer - while the suspicion only grew. Even at rest, there was a nervous, agitated quality to Linghui Mei, but soon enough, she started to nod off, eyes fluttering closed. Qian Shanyi paused what she was saying, but Linghui Mei did not react, breathing quietly through her little nose. Asleep.

Hm. The spirit hunter said that he had chased her for two sleepless days, but spirit hunters worked in pairs - one could sleep while the other guided the thunderhorse. Not so much for their target, who had to flee on foot.

When was the last time she had any rest? That could certainly explain some of the tension. Perhaps it was good to simply give her some space. There would be time enough for questions tomorrow.

Qian Shanyi snapped her fingers in front of Lingui Mei's nose, and watched her spring up in a panic, limbs shifting, both tails bursting forth, fangs out. From up close, she could feel that the physical tails moved independently from the tails of kitsune's soul, and it was only the latter that tore hungrily at the cilia of her soul. Most cultivators would naturally assume the two were one and the same. A deadly trick, that.

"Don't sleep outside," Qian Shanyi said seriously, once Linghui Mei's eyes focused on her, breathing slowly stabilizing. "There are rosevines in the ground here."

"Rosevines?"

Qian Shanyi pulled out the jade slate for the Three Obediences Four Virtues, and flipped to the corresponding page, showing the picture to Linghui Mei. "Plant demon beasts," she explained, "Ambush predators. If they get to you in your sleep, they will strangle you. Go into the hut if you are tired."

Narrowed eyes. More suspicion. Did she not want to fall asleep first? Good thinking, if so - Qian Shanyi would have felt the same in her place. "As a matter of fact," she said, faking a yawn, "I think I will follow my own advice. This was a long day, and you won't need your own hammock tonight. You can use Yonghaos' - he won't be needing it while he sleeps upstairs. Let me show you our hut."

Qian Shanyi quickly changed into her nightly robes, tied her long hair into a bun with a protective piece of cloth over it, and showed Linghui Mei how to slot the two beams that served as their door into place. The hut plunged into darkness, only a few slits in the walls letting in rays of light.

"Bottom one is mine, top one is yours," Qian Shanyi said, motioning to the hammocks. After the sap started dripping, she moved her hammock below Wang Yonghao's, so that his disgusting luck could at least serve as her shield. It worked brilliantly.

"I am not going to sleep now."

"You sure?" Qian Shanyi said, hopping into her hammock. She put her slippers below it, next to her head - in easy reach, and shielded by her body from the dripping sap - and her sword by her side. "You looked about ready to collapse."

For a moment, she thought about her gloves - usually she took them off, but... Better safe than sorry. There was no rational reason for Linghui Mei to attack her, but that doesn't mean she wouldn't do it. If they had to fight, she'd prefer to have her rope techniques at her side.

"I'll be fine," Linghui Mei said stubbornly.

Qian Shanyi shrugged. “Alright. Just make sure you don’t tip the beams over when you move them around. They make a terrible noise when they fall. We used to lock them with a sword… But honestly, they are so heavy, I doubt rosevines can make them budge.”

Wang Yonghao was going to be poking his head in and out of the world fragment every so often, so she didn’t feel too bad about leaving the kitsune to her own devices. She turned to the wall, closing her eyes. Her breathing slowly eased, as she consciously relaxed her muscles one by one. This was a long day. Hopefully the next one will be easier.

She awoke to the sound of wood scraping. A haze of light passed over her closed eyelids, before the darkness returned. Linghui Mei must have come back.

She didn’t move, pretending to still be asleep, and kept the cilia of her soul close, her spiritual senses narrowed down to only a meter away from her body. For all that she thought she had something of a read on the kitsune... she still felt a bit anxious from staying in the same room as a spiritophage. But she didn’t want to make it *obvious,* either. Their relationship started on a sour note - to repair it, she wanted to show trust, even if she didn't truly feel it.

Still a bit groggy from a sleep cut short, she did her best to sharpen her awareness with some of the same techniques she learned to lucid dream. Once you knew how to relax your mind, staying awake simply involved doing the exact opposite.

A rustle of clothing here, a step there. Linghui Mei must have sat down next to one of the walls - not climbing into her hammock - and stayed quiet. Qian Shanyi’s mind played tricks on her - was she even there at all? But she knew better. So strained was her hearing, that she even heard a couple liquid drops fall on the wooden floor of the hut.

Hopefully she is not drooling, imagining how my spirit would taste.

It was hard to judge how much time had passed. Perhaps it was only a couple minutes, or perhaps a good part of an hour. She heard Wang Yonghao show up outside, and then leave again. The world fragment plunged into silence.

A soft, heaving sob broke it. Then another.

“Why me?” a whisper. “Why, Heavens?”

Inside, Qian Shanyi relaxed. Having a breakdown after a three-day long chase was only to be expected. Of all the reasons Linghui Mei had for not going to sleep, this had to be the best one.

Besides, it gave her a bit of a chance to eavesdrop.

“Will I even see them again?” A sniffle. “Will I even get out of here again?”

*Interesting. See **who**?*

"A month." Another quiet sniffle. "As if. *Cultivators*. But... No. This *has* to be a trap," a sharp draw of breath, with a bit of a whine. "But...why, then? It doesn't make any sense."

Rustle of cloth. Two soft footsteps, so quiet she was almost sure she imagined them. Two more. Pacing around? On the very edge of her spiritual energy awareness, dim as it was, she felt Linghui Mei step closer to her hammock - though her spiritual energy did not pulse, merely beat softly like an ordinary person. Staring at her sleep, no doubt.

"She is a cultivator," she heard a whisper, quiet, barely even uttered, "she is just a cultivator. They are all the same."

Qian Shanyi tensed, though she did not let it show on her body. If she attacked… She could manifest her spiritual shield in a blink, and it took Linghui Mei a good second to shift, if what she saw from her before was any indication. In a fight between a spirit and a cultivator, the first strike decided all - and she would have it in hand.

She hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

She felt Linghui Mei bend down, reaching below her hammock. A quiet scrape - her sword - before she moved away. In her heart of hearts, Qian Shanyi sighed.

Oh well. So much for peace.

She really didn't think she'd go for it. It was a terrible idea all around, really - but if so…

She shifted in her hammock slightly, as if moving around in a dream, putting one of her hands under her cheek. The other dropped off the hammock, resting just a centimeter away from her sandals, ready to turn them into daggers at any moment. The kitsune froze, not even a breath leaving her lips. Minutes passed.

There was only one logical reason to move her sword - if the kitsune intended to attack her in her sleep. But then what was she waiting for? Why not transform, get her soul-sucking tails out?

Another hitched breath, breaking the silence. "I have to." Another quiet sniffle. "But… Then what? There isn't even an exit…"

Oh? Someone having second thoughts?

Qian Shanyi stayed quiet, her breathing even.

Best case, she talks herself out of it. I'll pretend nothing happened - what's a bit of planned murder between friends?

Linghui Mei stepped closer, just out of reach, but then stopped. Another couple drops hit the floor.

“Even if I escape, what do I do? The spirit hunter is still close… Another chase, I can’t -”

Sweet mercy, either try to kill me, or go to sleep already. If this melodrama goes on for the whole night, the anticipation will make me end myself.

Somewhere up above, she heard the entrance to the world fragment open. Linghui Mei froze, silent like the grave.

Should she call out to Wang Yonghao? It would definitely startle Linghui Mei, and she was already on edge... Dangerous. She’d be ceding the advantage of surprise, too, and without it she did not envy her chances of getting out of the hut before the kitsune tore her soul out, spiritual shield or not. Still better than a coinflip… But too dangerous to risk blindly.

And on top of that, she still felt there was a good chance of her talking herself out of it.

Taking the middle ground, she shifted around again, laying on her back, and letting out something between a moan and a yawn. Her eyelids fluttered slightly, as if she was about to wake up.

Go on then. Last chance to strike…

Just as she planned, it forced a decision, though not either of the ones she expected. Four steps, leg swinging over the hammock, and then Linghui Mei was straddling her, one hand closed around her throat.

Qian Shanyi let it happen, barely keeping herself from laughing. The *one* uncertainty in fighting the kitsune was wherever she could get her tails out before Qian Shanyi could slice her throat - and she had just delivered herself directly within Qian Shanyi’s striking distance. Her claws weren’t even out.

Did she want to interrogate her? Fine. If she needed this false assurance of safety, so be it.

“If you would like to fuck -” Qian Shanyi said, opening one eye lazily.

A ray of sunlight fell on Linghui Mei’s face, glistening wet from the tears, the collar of her robes all but soaked through. “*Silence,*” she hissed.

“- you would have to at least get me out of my robes,” Qian Shanyi continued, ignoring the threat.

Somewhere above, the entrance to the world fragment closed. Wang Yonghao probably didn't even hear them.

"*I will speak*," Linghui Mei said, her voice cracking a bit. "*You* will answer my questions, or *I will tear out your soul.*"

"Will you now? How terrifying," Qian Shanyi deadpanned. "I am quaking in my boots. Ones I am not even wearing."

"You are not the first cultivator I killed," Linghui Mei snarled. Her eyes were wild. "I see through your bluffs. You can't manifest your precious spiritual shield with my hand around your throat. You are defenseless."

Qian Shanyi snorted. That was true enough, but of course all it would take to change that was to sever those arrogant little fingers, or better yet, her throat. Qian Shanyi's hand was already closed around her slipper, hidden behind her own head, ready to be transformed into a dagger with a single thought. "Who are you trying to convince - me or yourself?" she said lazily. "But fine, very well. Far be it from me to refuse to talk to a girl who crawls into my bed. Ask your questions."

"What is your plan?"

"You would have to be *a lot* more specific."

"Your plan *for me*."

"What makes you think I have a plan?"

Hand around her throat tightened. It was actually starting to feel a little uncomfortable. "Enough evasions," Linghui Mei said, "someone like you *always* has plans."

Qian Shanyi laughed. "Ha! Why, thank you for the compliment. Fine, I do have a plan. But what's it to you?"

"What?"

"What do you care what my plan is?" Qian Shanyi said patiently. "We give you refuge until you go on your way. Isn't it what you already want?"

"I want to know what your agenda is. *Answer. Now.*"

"And if I don't want to?" Qian Shanyi raised an eyebrow. "Your threats are empty."

"I control your *life* and *death*," Linghui Mei said, with quite a bit of desperation in her voice.

Qian Shanyi slowly raised her free hand, casually stroking a single finger over the hand holding her by the throat. “Do you feel in control?” she asked quietly. “If you kill me, Yonghao *would* kill you. You can’t even reach the entrance without him.”

That was a lie. She could, the same way Qian Shanyi did, with a spear and a rope - but she wasn’t about to mention this.

“It’s alright to be afraid, you know,” she continued, “being chased by spirit hunters for two days straight - that must have been terrifying. But why threaten me? I have done nothing to harm you.”

The hand around her throat relaxed again, fingers trembling slightly. A couple tears welled up in Linghui Mei’s eyes, but she shook her head, scowling down at Qian Shanyi. “No. You are a cultivator. Cultivators lie and they butcher. *Stop lying.*”

“Oh very well. You wanted to know my agenda?” Qian Shanyi said. “I want to resolve our problems. Get kitsune taken off the list of species incompatible with human life.”

“*Why?*”

“It’s the right thing to do.”

“I don’t believe you,” Linghui Mei said, wiping her eyes off with her free hand. “Three hundred centuries of blood, and then you would just *stop?* No. Impossible.”

“There is precedent,” Qian Shanyi said quietly. “Dwarves used to be on it.”

“Why?” Linghui Mei glared at her, all that emotion shifting to fury all of a sudden. “Why would *you* want to help *me*?”

“Why shouldn’t I help a fellow cultivator?”

“Who?”

Qian Shanyi rolled her eyes. So slow on the uptake. “You, obviously.”

“*What?*” Linghui Mei leaned back, her hand relaxing completely from shock. “I am not a cultivator!”

“Of course you are.”

“*I am not!*” Linghui Mei snarled, hand tightening on her throat again, “I am a *jiuweihu!* I am not one of you butchers!“

It took Qian Shanyi a second to place it. *Jiuweihu*, one of a dozen ancient terms for a kitsune. Not a word anyone used nowadays. That Linghui Mei said it meant *something* - but what?

“Please,” she smirked, ”Anyone can be a cultivator. Why not a … jiuweihu?”

“I *kill* cultivators!”

“What of it? Many cultivators do as well,” Qian Shanyi said, “to cultivate is to rebel against the heavens, and what is the empire if not the heavens to a lonely jiuweihu?”

She probably shouldn’t have been needling her as much, but Linghui Mei’s eyes burned with such hatred that she just couldn’t stop herself. “Shut your mouth!” the kitsune shouted in her face. “I do not cultivate and I will *never* cultivate!”

“A stupid cultivator is still a cultivator.”

“No,” Linghui Mei snarled again. Her shape blurred slightly, ink leaking in air once more. Losing control of emotions, or preparing to strike? “You lie. You *always* lie. Now *tell me what you want with me!*”

Alright, this was starting to get too dangerous even for Qian Shanyi’s tastes. She mumbled a sentence under her breath, looking away from the kitsune, pushing a bit of blood into her cheeks to make them blush.

“Speak louder,” Linghui Mei said, leaning forwards.

Qian Shanyi slammed her forehead into Linghui Mei’s nose and, with a twist of her hips, flipped the hammock over. Linghui Mei howled wildly, blood flowing down her face as she was tangled up in the ropes. She began to shift, ink spilling into the air, but Qian Shanyi did not wait for her to finish.

Dagger in hand, she lept towards the door and slammed into it shoulder first, sending it toppling out of the hut. Her ribs protested at the abuse. She had no time to grab her sword from the hut, but… Rolling on the grass, she dashed to the side, and reached behind one of the foundation pillars, taking out the sword that used to secure the door beams in place. She never bothered putting it back into their treasury. Good thing she didn’t.

The kitsune leapt out of the hut a couple seconds later, all snarls, fur and fury. One of her tails slammed into the doorframe on the way, and the wood splintered. She crouched down to the ground, fangs bared. Her spiritual energy pulsed again, like a monster the size of a building was breathing through her skin, as fast as a panting dog.

“You know, I don’t appreciate being called a liar,” Qian Shanyi said calmly, her sword spinning gently above her head on jets of spiritual energy, dagger held loosely in her right hand. She felt a lot more confident now, with two weapons and plenty of space for maneuver. “Especially when I am, for once, telling the truth. I would accept an apology.”

“The only ‘apology’ one of your kind will get from me is my fangs on your throat!”

“How very close minded of you. And we were having such fun chatting about cultivation.”

Linghui Mei began to circle her, staying quiet.

“Would you not prefer it if we went back to talking?” Qian Shanyi said lazily, “But this time, without the threats, if you don’t mind? I assume you still have questions.”

“Your lies are worth *nothing* to me.”

Qian Shanyi pursed her lips in annoyance. “You know, in this entire town, I think you are the only person I told no lies. Even Yonghao got some, though he knows the truth of it now. What is it that makes my words so hard to believe?“

No response. Hopefully Wang Yonghao will poke his head back in soon. She would feel *much* safer if she could simply fly away.

“I would say I am sorry for breaking your nose, but you already seem fine,” she continued.

A growl this time. “You will be sorry when I tear your throat out with my claws!”

Back to bluster, are we?

She needed to deescalate this conflict, but… How? Linghui Mei did not trust her words, and seemed set on lashing out.

Perhaps she would trust her actions. She just needed to bait her a bit more. Qian Shanyi gave Linghui Mei a little clap. She was still holding the dagger, so it wasn’t much. “Such certainty! Where was it when you were deciding wherever to kill me, back in the hut?”

The kitsune froze for a brief moment, and Qian Shanyi smirked. “But you can’t beat me. So why must we fight, *fellow cultivator* Linghui -”

“*I am not a cultivator!*” the kitsune screamed, predictably, and sprung at her, an enormous leap that would have crossed the distance between them in a blink.

It would have been surprising if the flow of spiritual energy did not announce her every intention well in advance. Just before she leaped, it stopped flowing into kitsune’s body, and pulsed

outwards, empowering her leap. Qian Shanyi sent her flying sword to intercept and, with nothing for Linghui Mei to grab onto in the empty air, this would have been the end of it - but she was merciful, and spun the blade around at the last moment, slamming its pommel into the kitsune's diaphragm with a sickening crunch.

The kitsune fell to the ground, coughing up blood. Qian Shanyi calmly recalled the sword to her side. She expected this, really. Cultivators trained to fight for many years, but Linghui Mei had nowhere to train, no sect to teach her, no library to pull knowledge from. Whomever her victims were, she surely simply ambushed them, relying on her natural advantages - but there was no technique there, no strategy. Just fury and grief.

"Of course you are a cultivator," Qian Shanyi said, gesturing with the dagger, still held loosely in her hand, heading towards the kitchens. There were two more swords there, and even her knives. Discussion would go much better once Linghui Mei had no fight left in her. "You use spiritual energy. You are sapient. You have rebelled against the heavens -"

"I have *never* violated the Heavenly will," Linghui Mei cut her off, stumbling up on her limbs in a cloud of ink and smoke. "I serve the Heavens *to the letter*."

Surprisingly resilient, this one. Perhaps changing her form helped with injuries?

"The Heavens have no servants, only slaves," Qian Shanyi shrugged, studying her. "Will you say that you pray to them for help? I know *spirit hunters* who do so as well. Despite this debasement, they are still cultivators. As are you."

"You want to know what I pray for? I pray that the blood will *boil in your veins* and the skin will *peel off your corpse*," Linghui Mei screamed, her voice raising with every sentence. She went back to circling around, looking for an opening. "I pray that your children, and your children's children know *no peace* as celestials hunt you down through the night. I pray that your entire damned empire shatters until there is *nothing left!* Every night I pray that the Heavens will wipe your *filth* away from this world, and every morning I wake up disappointed!"

Qian Shanyi tapped her cheek with her free hand. "Hm. You know, I can actually respect that."

"*Liar!*"

"What?" Qian Shanyi laughed. "Most karmists are deluded in their view of the Heavens. To see plainly that all they can do is murder - this is refreshing. Evil to ask, of course, but refreshing. Even somewhat understandable, given your circumstances." She pointed her dagger at the kitsune. "But tell me, how many of your prayers have been answered? Seeing as how we are still here, I suspect the answer is *none*."

"Shut up," Linghui Mei said hoarsely. Her leg spasmed, making her sprawl on the ground for a moment, but she got back up.

Qian Shanyi ignored her. “It never ceases to amuse me,” she continued, “You can be the best servant the Heavens could possibly ask for, yet if they feel the need, they will discard you without a second thought. They have sent you here to die, little spirit. The only reason you still live is because cultivators decided your life has meaning. That Heavens do not get to determine your fate.”

“You lie,” Linghui Mei said, though her voice shook. “Cultivators kill and lie. Behind all masks, that is what you *are*. At least the Heavens are honest.”

“Where is the lie?” Qian Shanyi said, “If you follow their will and kill me, Yonghao will kill you. If you fail, then I would have killed you. If you flee, the spirit hunter will kill you. And if you, against all odds, succeed - the Heavens will still kill you, to conceal Yonghao’s secrets. They want to kill *me* because of *him*, you see. All their paths lead to your demise, because your life is worth less than nothing to the Heavens - and you know this!”

The kitsune sprung again, but she was moving slower now, even more predictable. Qian Shanyi didn’t even feel the need to use her sword, merely dodging far to the side.

“Then just fucking kill me,” Linghui Mei said as she landed, choking back a sob. “Just do it. What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t want to kill you. I don’t even want to hurt you, but you keep trying to bite my head off. If you would just *stop doing that* -”

Linghui Mei spun around, weakness partly faked, and lept at Qian Shanyi again - but for all that her acting was good, her spiritual energy gave up the whole facade. Another crunch. This time, Linghui Mei screamed in pain.

“Please, can you just *listen?*” Qian Shanyi pleaded. For all that she wasn’t the one screaming, it felt like she hit herself with that sword. She was starting to regret baiting her. “Let us help. We’ll teach you to cultivate, develop a new recirculation law to help fix whatever deficiency is forcing you to feed on people. Even if we don’t manage that - it’d make you stand out a lot less, if you could pass for a loose cultivator.”

More ink and smoke, as Linghui Mei slowly stumbled on her feet, but her legs spasmed again, sending her to the ground. Her shape shifted from fox to woman and back to fox, seemingly involuntarily. She began to sob, and then cry, harsh wails mixed with choked breaths.

Qian Shanyi sighed, and bowed. “For what it is worth, I apologize for my crude methods. I will give you some space.”

She empathized with Linghui Mei, in as far as she could. To be hunted all her life, and then see an offer of help from the very people she feared - it must have been shocking in the extreme. That she lashed out wasn't unexpected.

At least it didn't seem like she was going to try to kill her again.

Qian Shanyi settled down next to the entrance of their hut, leaving the door open, with her back against the wall. Out of sight, out of mind. Sadly, there was no way for her to leave the world fragment entirely.

While she waited for the kitsune to calm down, she went over what each of them said. Best to do it immediately, while the words were still fresh in her mind - there were a couple interesting morsels she wanted to follow up on. She wished she could have written it all down - but her writing set wasn't in the hut, and she didn't want to go out while Linghui Mei was still sobbing.

She frowned. Actually, that didn't sound like sobbing anymore. Just… choking...

She glanced out the entrance, and immediately sprinted over. Linghui Mei was writhing on the ground, two rosevines wrapped around her neck. Her lips were starting to look a little blue, as she scratched at the vines with her claws, but the rosevines were hard to tear. Keratin could not compete with the sharpness of a cultivator sword.

The kitsune was flaying around blindly, one of her tails coming perilously close to bashing Qian Shanyi's skull open. "I am trying to help, *you moron*," she hissed, trying to get closer. Linghui Mei kept thrashing, not responding. Perhaps she was already insensate.

A couple careful cuts with her sword, dancing in and out of reach, and the rosevines fell to the ground. Linghui Mei breathed deeply, coughing. Her body convulsed still.

"Are you alright?" Qian Shanyi asked, warily coming closer.

"Thank you for - for saving me," Linghui Mei sobbed. Her legs twitched, arching her back for a brief moment.

"Just helping out a fellow cultivator," Qian Shanyi said casually, "what happened to you?"

Linghui Mei looked away, and Qian Shanyi felt a spike of annoyance. Was she going to give a non-answer again? "Too much power," she finally said, and Qian Shanyi breathed out some of the tension. "I am spent. Don't have any more," she sniffled, tears welling up in her eyes again. "I've never gone this far before. I can't even move my own body. What is happening to me?"

Qian Shanyi looked over the kitsune, writhing on the ground. She wasn't screaming in pain, so perhaps it didn't hurt. "There are some forms of qi deviation, caused by a bad training regimen

or drugs unsuited to the body, that would cause a seizure like this," she said after a moment of deliberation, "I've seen it once or twice. Perhaps this is similar."

"Never push yourself," Linghui Mei sniffled. The words had a feel of a rule, repeated thousands of times. "Always quiet, always hidden. Keep each face as long as you can. I am sorry, mom." She turned to Qian Shanyi. "Will I die?"

"I don't know," Qian Shanyi said honestly. "I am not a healer, and I have neither the skills nor the equipment to diagnose you."

"I don't want to die," Linghui Mei choked. There was true terror in her eyes now. "Please."

"How could I help?"

Linghui Mei looked away. Was that…guilt? "I need to feed," she said quietly. Qian Shanyi's face darkened. "Please."

Qian Shanyi scowled. "Please *what?* You want me to just offer you my soul? My cultivation? After you have *repeatedly* tried to kill me?"

"It won't kill you," Linghui Mei said quickly. "I'll only take a bit. People always recover. You'd forget your last day, at most."

Qian Shanyi's scowl deepened. "According to *you*. How do I know this isn't just another ploy?"

Nothing she had seen from Linghui Mei made her seem as that great of an actress, but when someone was pushed to the brink of death, all sorts of talents rose to the surface.

"I *swear* it's not."

"A promise is worth nothing if I can't remember it."

"But *I* will."

Qian Shanyi stared at Linghui Mei for a while, before getting up with a sigh. "No. I don't trust you this much. Wait until Yonghao comes back. Best I can give you is food and water."

"You said if I kill you, I would die as well," Linghui Mei pleaded, "Please. I won't do it."

"And then you still attacked me, did you not?" Qian Shanyi threw over her shoulder, heading to the kitchens. They had a fair bit of heavenly rabbit left. "If I was in your place, there would be no rational reason for you to kill me. But you are not like me."

It only took her a few minutes to whip up a plate of raw rabbit slices and a cup of water. By the time she returned, Linghui Mei had gotten worse. More convulsions, more changes. Her skin was in patches now, different colors blending together. Her face looked like a wax figure left a bit too close to a candle flame, features melting, no longer quite human. One eye was half a centimeter off to the side now.

“I am sorry I attacked you,” Linghui Mei whined. “I didn’t know what to do. I was scared.”

“Eat,” Qian Shanyi ordered, using a pair of chopsticks to put a slice of rabbit in her mouth.

Linghui Mei swallowed it without chewing. “I can do anything, please. I’ll learn to cultivate.“

“Cultivation is for your own benefit.” Another slice. “You may as well offer to eat well and live a long life.”

For a while, Linghui Mei simply cried, in between slices of rabbit and sips of water. She might have stopped decaying quite as fast, but then again, it might have been Qian Shanyi’s imagination at work.

Wang Yonghao did not appear. Ten minutes on the outside meant three quarters of an hour here - if he was busy with something, who knew when he would poke his head in again. He surely thought they were fast asleep. Perhaps he was too.

“I just wanted to see my son again,” Linghui Mei sniffled. She didn’t even have the strength to cry now. “I so rarely can. They have to stay secret, nothing for the spirit hunters to find. But he is so clever, so good with the needle… He made me a toy, a little fox. And I… I took it. I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t *not*. And then that spirit hunter caught my trail.” She paused, just staring into space. “I had to lure him away, but I lost the toy in the chase. Heavens, please, do not let him find my son. Anything but that.”

“You mentioned daughters before,” Qian Shanyi asked quietly. “If you tell us where your children live, perhaps we could help them later.”

Linghui Mei shook her head, panic spiking in her eyes. The convulsions had progressed up to her neck now, and so the motion was jerky, uneven. “No! Never,” she choked back a sob. “I would rather die than reveal that. They will do better on their own.”

Qian Shanyi shrugged. Probably reasonable, all things considered. What could she even tell them?

Hello, I am a friend of your mother, who is a kitsune - would you mind admitting your relationship? Pay no attention to the cultivator robes, please.

Linghui Mei stared up into the sky, quiet. Qian Shanyi observed her quietly, thinking over what she knew of the woman. For all that Linghui Mei chose to attack her, she felt a bit guilty for baiting her into it. If she didn't, tried to speak more neutrally… there was no guarantee she would have trusted her, but perhaps she wouldn't have spent this much energy in the fight.

All things considered… Linghui Mei did not seem malicious. Paranoid, shortsighted, hurt and quick to anger - but not malicious.

Could she really just let her die?

To cultivate is to rebel against the heavens. If the heavens proscribe your fate, is it not my duty to save you?

Qian Shanyi grimaced. Sometimes she hated her own thoughts. "Wait here," she said, and got up.

What a pointless thing to say, she berated herself as she picked up her writing set, and brought it back to the woman. *What is she going to do, walk off?*

"You have said you want to live?"

"Who doesn't," Linghui Mei said grimly.

"Plenty of people choose to die. Some for principles, others for honor. Besides your children - is there anything else you would die for?"

Linghui Mei grimaced. Perhaps it would have been a scowl, if she still had the strength. "I don't have the luxury to care about anything else."

"And for them, you would do anything?"

Linghui Mei glanced at her suspiciously. "Yes."

"That is what I meant when I said you are already a cultivator," Qian Shanyi said, shaking her head. "You have the mindset. Very well. I have changed my mind. To cultivate is to spit in the face of death, and so I have decided you will not die today."

She picked up a brush. Cracking fate in half took careful calligraphy.

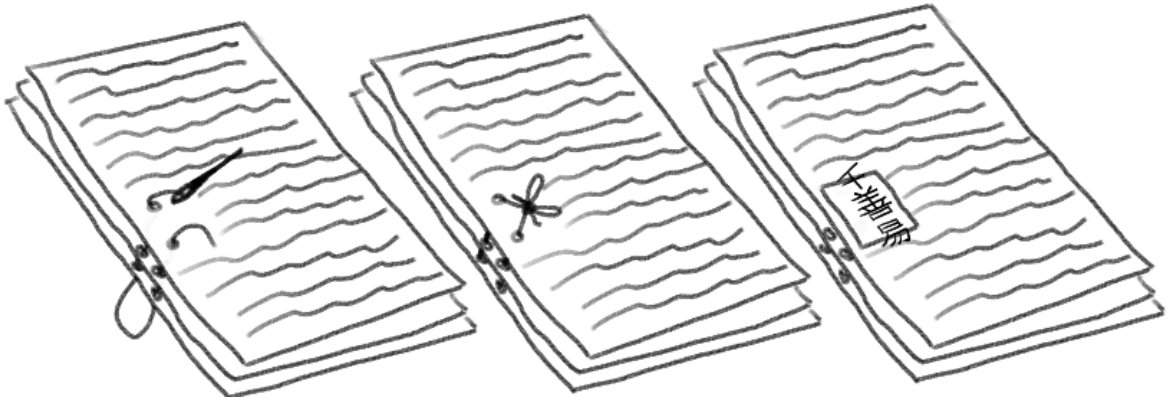
She started to write down what happened today, using her personal shorthand. There was a delicate balance in play: the time was running out, but if she forgot a key detail, it would be disastrous.

She ended up with three sheets of careful handwriting. Shuffling through them, she pursed her lips. She had to be *very* careful here. If she messed this up…

I'll forget I ever wrote them. What if I think Linghui Mei hid the fourth sheet?

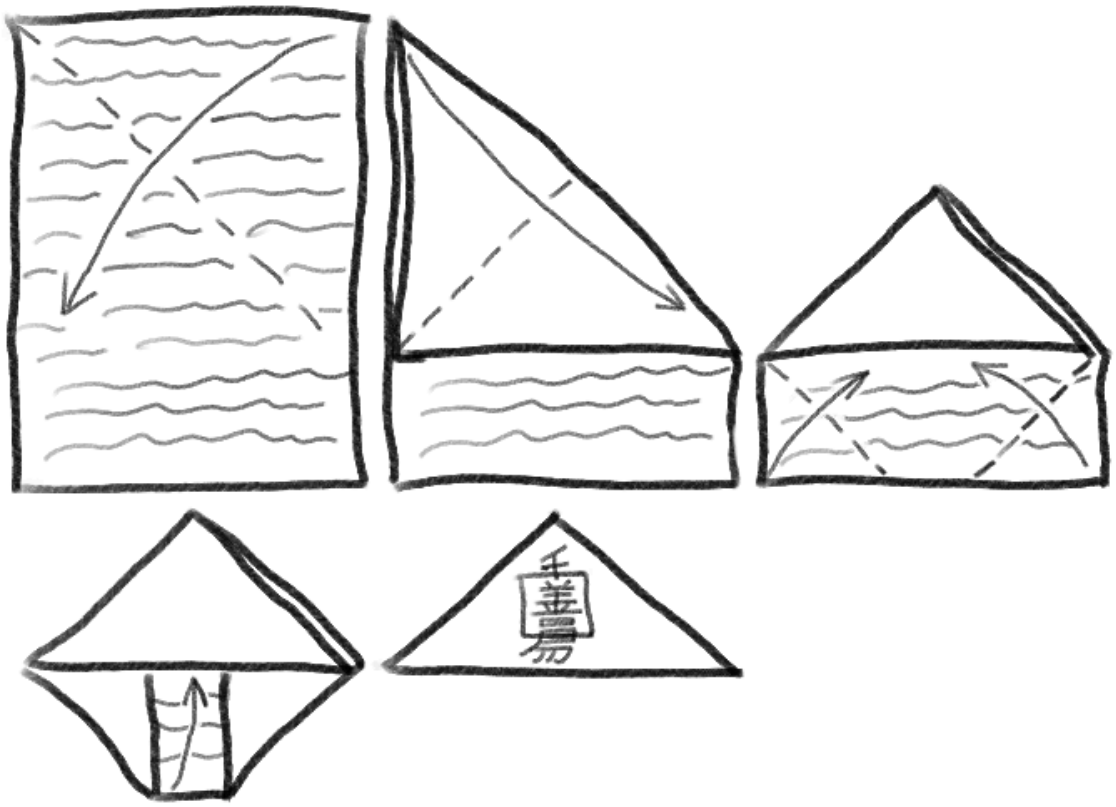
She added a numbering to the corner, page one out of three.

Not good enough. I might assume she added the numbering after she already tossed out one of the sheets.



She ran over to her sewing set, and pierced through the sheets, tying them together with thread so that they could not be separated without damage. Using some of her collected pine sap, she glued the thread itself to the paper, and then a small piece of paper on top, completely covering the knot. Then she wrote the first paragraph of the story of Gu Lingtian over it - she had it memorized by heart - making sure plenty of characters crossed from one paper to the other. Even if the glue could be removed to take one of the pages out without tearing them, putting it all back together exactly in place, so that all the strokes lined up, would be incredibly difficult.

Could she fake my handwriting?



Qian Shanyi circulated the Crushing Glance of the Netherworld Eyes, and used one finger to sign her name all the way across each page in glowing powder, as well as numbering the pages a second time. Folding the papers up into a simple triangular envelope, so that none of the text could be seen from the outside, she repeated the process, piercing the entire envelope up with more thread, and signing her name across it.

Okay. This should do.

“Listen carefully,” she said, returning to Linghui Mei. “I am going to let you feed on me.”

Kitsune’s left eye was full of blossoming hope, glued to her every word. The other could no longer open. “I wrote notes to myself, explaining what happened,” Qian Shanyi continued in the same even tone. “I can be a *very* paranoid woman. When I find myself next to a *kitsune*, with no memories of how it happened, my first instinct will be to chop your head off on the spot. Tell me to read my notes, and then explain everything that happened, *in detail*. If you seem *at all* aggressive, I will assume you already attacked me, and chop your head off. If you hide things and I notice it, I will assume you are lying, and chop your head off. If you make a mistake that contradicts my notes, I will assume you are lying, and chop your head off. If I see *any* indication you *may* have messed with my notes in *any way*, I will *definitely* assume you are lying, and chop your head off. Please be careful and make sure I don’t kill you.”

“I will. Thank you,” Linghui Mei said quietly.

Qian Shanyi moved closer to Linghui Mei, keeping the letter she wrote to herself in her lap, and put a hand on Linghui Mei's shoulder. "Go ahead," she said.

The spiritual tails reached for her, and then she remembered nothing at all.